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SUBJECT: THE KING'S RIGHT-HAND MAN RESIGNS TO RUN FOR  
PARLIAMENT AND...

Classified By: Polcouns Craig Karp for reasons 1.4 (b) and (d).

¶1. (U) Shocking the conventional wisdom, the Royal Palace announced the resignation of Fouad Ali El Himma from his post of Delegate Minister of the Interior late on August 7. The Palace said he was leaving his post to run in the upcoming elections "on equal footing with all Moroccan citizens." Palace newspaper Le Matin reported that the King accepted El Himma's resignation praising his "human, professional qualities" and "loyalty" to the throne. It is widely believed that the intent is to legitimize his role as the King's right-hand man, rather than his being moved out, with speculation emerging in the press that he is being positioned to be named Prime Minister after the elections.

¶2. (SBU) El Himma is a close friend of the King Mohammed VI, dating from the time they studied together at the Royal College. Earlier, El Himma was then-Crown Prince Mohammed VI's Chief of Cabinet, and was named State Secretary to the Interior when the King ascended the throne in 1999. He "moved up" to the Minister-Delegate post in 2002. Due to his close ties with the Mohammed VI, however, he is widely believed to be the most influential person in Morocco after the King, more important than his nominal boss, Interior Minister Benmoussa. He previously served in Parliament as an independent, and is not currently affiliated with any political party. On August 8, El Himma confirmed to the press that he would run in his old district of Ben Guerir.

¶3. (C) Initial reaction of the political parties has been one of "shock and awe." As we know that at least one party leader was called to see the king the day of the announcement, we suspect at least government coalition leaders may have been briefed shortly before the announcement. One paper called the announcement an "earthquake in the political class," concluding it is evident that El Himma did not quit to be a simple Parliamentarian, noting it found consternation in particular among those who were positioning themselves for the Prime Ministership. PJD Parliamentary chief Lahcen Daoudi called it "a bad message for politics in general," saying that El Himma should have announced a year -- not a month -- before the election. Daoudi said he would campaign in the district for the PJD candidate El Himma would be running against.

¶4. (C) Comment: We tend to agree with most observers who see this not as an exile from El Himma's position close to the throne, but as positioning for a future move with greater legitimacy as an elected rather than appointed politician.

There is growing speculation that El Himma could come back after elections as Interior Minister or even Prime Minister. Such designation would probably mean he would have to be a member of the majority coalition. This would normally be as a political party member, although he has given no indication of joining a party yet and he could ostensibly join the coalition as an independent. If he ends up at Interior, this would be the first time in Morocco's history that the Minister of the Interior post was occupied by an elected Parliamentarian. In either case, we believe that placing official, constitutional role and responsibility in the hands of the person who actually exercises the decision-making power would serve the cause of transparency and gradual reform, and as such this episode would represent a step forward for democratic reform in Morocco. One potential downside is that it could fuel the view of many Moroccans -- particularly the young -- that the elections themselves have little real impact. End Comment.

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